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Mass Media Technics and Post-Politics in César Aira's *La villa*

> [O]ne can say that when the astronauts set foot on the moon, the moon *as* moon disappeared. It no longer rose or set. It is now only a calculable parameter for the technological enterprise of humans.
>
> Martin Heidegger, "Seminar in Le Thor 1969" (38)[1]

In recent years Latin Americanist cultural criticism has paid increasing attention to mass media as it affects both inner life (perception, imagination and thought), social relations (ways of representing community, projecting national belonging and envisioning alternative political possibilities) as well as the production, dissemination and archiving of knowledge. The German media theorist Friedrich Kittler characterizes the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century as the age of media differentiation. Differentiation marks a shift from a time dominated by a single media (print) to an era in which the written word must compete with visual and sound media—which in many respects prove more adept than print at capturing the speed and noise of modernity. For Latin America, meanwhile, the work of Néstor García Canclini, Jesús Martín-Barbero, Carlos Monsiváis, Nelly Richard, Beatriz Sarlo and others has contributed in important ways to broadening our understanding of how the proliferation of visual and auditory media (photography, film, television and radio in particular) has displaced or reshaped old notions about sociality that had evolved in societies dominated by print media. By the same token, a recent anthology edited by Edmundo Paz-Soldán and Debra Castillo (*Latin American Literature and Mass Media*, 2002) offers an overview of how literary narrative processes have been informed by—and in turn how they have responded to—the differentiation of visual and auditory media.

This shift from print-dominated society to a society of differentiated media can be further elaborated as a distinction between

what Angel Rama called the "lettered city"—a "city" within the Latin American city whose privileged occupants were a "priestly caste" of intellectuals employed in legal, religious and pedagogical institutions, and whose work helped to control access to the law by maintaining the primacy of the written word—and a decentralized network of media that at least in principle excludes no one. The shift from one epistemological and juridical paradigm to another—from an arcane, self-enclosed "city" to the diffuse production of media whose sounds and images infiltrate every moment and corner of our daily lives—attests both to the promise of universal accessibility and to the fear of a totalizing, omniscient system. Furthermore, if the twentieth century witnesses profound and increasingly rapid transformations in how knowledge is produced, transmitted and stored, then it would seem that our understanding of how information is received and processed must also be rethought. It is far from clear that the old hermeneutic concepts that arose to help navigate print culture can be usefully carried over to media culture. Have scholars even begun to learn how to read an image?

Beatriz Sarlo takes a particularly pessimistic view of the impact of mass media technology in Latin America, arguing that its saturation of all areas of contemporary life (work, leisure, art, politics and so on) has debilitating effects on the possibilities for thinking and acting today. In Sarlo's view, the relentless and all-permeating flow of mediatic images numbs the sensibilities and disables any capacity for ethical deliberation or political judgment. One implicit point of departure for her critique is the notion, first introduced by Marshall McLuhan in his 1964 book *Understanding Media*, that mass media technics is synonymous with the implosion of space and the acceleration of time. But whereas McLuhan envisioned mass media as offering a communicative immediacy that could enable users to transcend cultural divisions and geographical distances to form new virtual communities, for Sarlo mass media technics carries a dismal prognosis. Unlike print media, in which the distance that separates it from its real-life object is always evident, the mediating effects proper to mass media are notoriously difficult to identify and distinguish from that which it mediates. The difficulty that mass media consumers face in distinguishing mediation from its object tends to erode the ethical and political basis of community. Mass media generates neither representations (like writing) nor immediacy (as McLuhan imagined) but mere simulations of the real. This critique is

developed in Sarlo's essay "Aesthetics and Post-Politics," an assessment of the complicity between mass media, neopopulism and neoliberalism in Latin America during the 1990s. The connection between television, populist imagery and the technocratic state is illustrated in Sarlo's characterization of mass media as fostering the displacement of the sign by the simulacrum in contemporary social relations. Here too Sarlo's critique relies on one of McLuhan's fundamental insights: electronic media announce the subsumption of content in form, message in medium. In mass media, the medium *is* the message. For Sarlo, an important consequence of this collapsing of content into form is that form ceases to embody the emancipatory promise it held much of modernity.

> Political symbols have changed, and if they were never really 'symbols of reason,' the latest Latin American examples [...] allow us to foresee the triumph of the simulacrum above all other modalities of symbolization. The symbols of the public sphere, along with its discursive genres, are replaced with a scenography that is no longer even a stage but rather stage-craft, constructed by and, above all, for the mirror of the mass media. (253)

Whatever mass media producers say they are doing, the mediatic production and dissemination of information is essentially a self-reflexive process. Mass media presides over the emergence of a new regime of truth that consolidates its power through the media event. Once it is organized and distributed by the media apparatus, public discourse ceases to be grounded in reference to social realities that are separate from the sites and channels where discourse is produced, transmitted and received. As political life becomes more and more dependent on mass media for information, and as this dependency becomes infused with the desire for immediacy (the value of information becoming a direct function of its perceived newness), the political is increasingly informed by the market logic of the media—its self-reflective tendencies, the production and dissemination of information as commodity, and so on. Mass communications today often has little to do with communicating truths that are "out there" and increasingly becomes both the subject and object of its presentations.

The mediatic spectacle bears a direct connection to what Sarlo calls "post-politics," a time in which technocratic knowledge emerges as the dominant code into which all collective decision-making must be translated in order to acquire legitimacy. The reduction of the political

to the domain of technical knowledge forecloses any possibility for radical transformation of social relations. Neoliberal order is in this sense both self-referential and obscurantist:

> If politics needs to compare options (what is more: needs to *produce* options), technology without politics presents itself as the *only* option. If political choices are increasingly complex and, consequently, difficult to communicate to public opinion, technology pretends to dispense with the need for public opinion because it presents its reasons as the only viable ones.
>
> This imaginary suture of the split between society and politics when technology takes the place of politics is itself a technologically produced simulation of knowledge, a simulacrum that does not explain but rather *points to itself.* (255, my emphasis)

These remarks echo the self-referential logic mentioned in the previously cited passage ("*by* and...*for* the mirror of the mass media"). The mediatic spectacle, characterized by the specular movement of self-presentation returning infinitely to itself, works in coordination with neoliberal post-politics in founding a new technocratic order, and likewise collaborates in obscuring the violence of this order's genesis.[2]

Before we accept as self-evident the idea that we are today living in the wake of a technologically-driven rupture, however, it might be worth asking whether Sarlo's critical account of the new mediatic regime does not mark the return of the *same old subject*: the subject of metaphysics. Her description of the formal logic of mass media production and transmission, as producing *of* and *for* itself, bears an uncanny resemblance to the philosophical subject described by Descartes (as the securing of the origins of representation) and by Hegel (as the auto-affective movement of consciousness). If what Sarlo understands of mass media technics is grounded in the same presuppositions that gave rise to modern philosophical systems, can we still speak of mass media and neoliberalism as instituting a definitive break with modernity?

Against Sarlo's position, one could argue that modern conceptualizations of the political were never fully explained by the notion of public sphere in which she grounds the ideas of producing and comparing options. The association between politics and decision belongs to a tradition of thinking about sovereignty according to which juridical and political orders originate in a thought of exception, or

in a decision—as to who is friend and who enemy, or concerning the application or suspension of the constitution and its legal order—that exceeds the scope of public debate. The exceptional decision cannot be subjected to the order of legality and legibility upon which it decides. In constituting or suspending a given legal or political order, the sovereign decision paradoxically falls outside. Sarlo avoids engaging with the problem of sovereignty and exception, in my view, because such considerations might well cast doubt on the clear and firm distinction she tries to maintain between the time of neoliberal populism and mass media technics on the one hand, and earlier versions of the modern state together with older distinctions between technology, aesthetics and ethics on the other.

Let us now examine in greater detail the formal link Sarlo draws between mass media and technocratic order. She claims that these two historical tendencies are able to bolster their authority through a logic of self-reflexivity, and that neither form ever truly moves away from its self-reflexive mode in order to refer outside itself—to non-technocratic reason or to a concrete, pre-mediatic reality. This view is problematic, however, in that it is unable to distinguish between what is specific and new to mass mediatic production, and what this tendency shares with the history of technological forms in general. While I have suggested that Sarlo ignores a possible formal connection between mass media and an older history of technological thinking, her claim that the current situation in Latin America is defined principally by its newness ("post") also minimizes the ways in which the populist state employed mass media in previous decades (see Martín Barbero, Kraniauskas).[3]

Sarlo's critique presupposes a rupture that would definitively separate mass media technics from older technological phenomena, and then equates this difference with the identity of mass media technics. In my view, Sarlo thereby attributes too much stability to the phenomenon she is seeking to describe, while foreclosing any insight into what mass media might share with older technological forms. The critique of mass media technics is too metaphysical in not being metaphysical enough.[4] In ignoring the possibility that mass media technics repeats certain aspects of the tradition, Sarlo's critique ends up assuming a thoroughly metaphysical position concerning technics. These points will be developed through a reading of César Aira's 2001 novel *La villa* in the dual context of Argentina's recent socio-economic crisis and the increasing presence of televisual media.

Given Aira's reputation as one of the most important contemporary writers working in Latin America, *La villa* has produced surprisingly little in the way of critical commentary. In fact, there is a dearth of scholarly attention to Aira's work as a whole. This silence has been explained by one of Aira's readers as an effect of the author's "hyperloquacious" literary production, which has generated two or three novels per year over the last decade or more (see Laddaga). As Sandra Contreras describes it, Aira's prolific production has helped foster a critical impression of a writer who is indifferent or even hostile to the traditional temporalities of literary production that were organized by the desire for the singular great Work, and who comes closer to embracing the speed and indifference of mass production. This image is reinforced by Aira's tendency to incorporate—thematically and stylistically—the machinery of mass culture (television, pulp fiction, etc.), thereby turning traditional understandings of literary aesthetics on their heads. As Contreras puts it, in Aira's writing "el valor de la distancia (distancia crítica de la literatura, distancia temporal o distancia de la calidad poética del texto) se convierte, vía la banalidad del presente y la televisión, en efecto devaluado de inmediatez" (Contreras 124). However, Aira's relation to mass culture is in fact more complicated than first meets the eye. In distinction from the position staked out by Sarlo, for whom modernist aesthetics and mass media are simply antithetical, Contreras describes the intertwining of literature and mass culture in Aira's novels as a strategic move that is analogous to Duchamp's artistic deployment of the *ready-made*. The appropriation of televisual effects and other facets of mass culture is Aira's attempt to reactivate the artistic process, to generate new literary procedures at a time when traditional methods have been exhausted and when art is thus in danger of being reduced to a purely technical process, "una mera producción de obras a cargo de quienes sabían y podían producirlas" (15).

What does this incorporation of mass culture as literary procedure look like? At a historical juncture when technics increasingly holds sway over our ways of perceiving, thinking and imagining, what would distinguish Aira's literary appropriations of mass media (its rhetoric, its styles and its rhythm) from the technical form itself? What would prevent Aira's work from becoming a mere effect—if not an outright apology—for a neoliberal-administered globalization? For Contreras, what prevents Aira's work from collapsing into the well from which it

draws is a temporal difference, or more precisely the introduction of the difference that is untimeliness:

> Se trata, siempre, de recetas de *cómo hacerlo*. Sólo que las recetas son únicas e inejemplares . . . o los métodos son directamente imposibles . . . o los procedimientos dejan de operar . . . Impráctico, inejemplar, y a desatiempo—lo definen una inadecuación y un desfasaje temporal en relación con el resultado—el procedimiento en Aira siempre es *anacrónico*. (18)

Aira's turn to mass media technics for literary "recipes" and "procedures" is a version of what John Johnston calls "mediality," or the tendency of literature to inscribe "in its own language the effects produced by other media" (Johnston 175). Mediality in Aira generates a literary effect that is neither fully adapted to the temporality of mass media nor the simple continuation of traditional literary procedures. Mediality introduces an excess or an imbalance—akin, perhaps, to a sense of jet lag (*desfasaje horario*)—that cannot be made proper to either time, either tradition or contemporaneity.

Of course, the notion that literature borrows its rhetoric, its images, its rhythm and its tonalities from other social spheres in order to generate its own procedures is by no means new. As Roberto González Echevarría demonstrated in *Myth and Archive* (1990), similar borrowing strategies can be found throughout the history of the novel. And as Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat points out, literary appropriations of mass culture—with either celebratory or critical intentions—have been going on in Latin America since at least the 1960s. What is perhaps new when it comes to *La villa* is the feeling that literature (or art in general) is no longer able to orient itself in relation to a *beyond*, a transcendent point outside the present that would serve both as literature's object of desire and its justification. As we will see, the feeling that the beyond has been subsumed within the here and now constitutes the starting point for Aira's unsettled and unsettling reflections on literature in the time of mass media technics.

Like many of Aira's novels, *La villa* is set in Flores, a middle-class neighborhood in Buenos Aires, which in this text borders on a fictive, eponymous *villa miseria* or shanty town. A key topos in Aira's novel, the *villa* locates the shadowy existence of those who remain unaccounted for in the prevailing calculus of the social in post-dictatorship Argentina. The inhabitants of urban and suburban *villas*

have historically included migrants from the country's interior who were stigmatized by the urban elite, as well as illegal immigrants from Andean countries. In recent decades, the *villas* have also come to be associated with a transnational drug trade, which has flourished alongside the systematic dismantling of old social structures following the 1976–1983 military dictatorship. The *villas* have long posed an ambiguous presence for the Argentine state. Under the populist regime of Juan Perón (1946–55) the existence of the *villas* was officially denied, while at the same time images of the state's interventions in *villa* life were used to highlight Peronism's mandate of incorporating marginalized sectors into modern society. The Peronist state publicized social programs designed to provide *villa* residents with free access to utilities and other necessities, while at the same time claiming that the *villas* were a thing of the past or would soon be entirely eradicated. Beginning in the 1990s, meanwhile, in the wake of widespread privatization and reduction of social services, the presence of *villas* has grown dramatically in and around Buenos Aires, with inhabitants increasingly obliged to pursue informal strategies for survival. Aira's novel employs two of the most recognizable and powerful images of abjection and social crisis in Argentina: the common practice in the *villas* of constructing elaborate, illegal networks of cables to draw electricity from the local power grid, and the emergence of trash-picking as a semi-permanent vocation for a large number of Argentines. The term used to describe these practitioners is *cartoneros*. Recent estimates place the number of *cartoneros* in metropolitan Buenos Aires as high as 60,000.

The location of the *villa* in the heart of the city yields a literary image of the failure of transition in Argentina during the decades of the 1980s and '90s, a transition from one political form to another (dictatorship to democracy) and from one principle of social organization to another (state to market). Similarly, the spectral sight of the *cartoneros* emerging from the *villa* at nightfall to make their rounds in the city attests to the violence that accompanies and sustains a new phase of accumulation in Latin America today. The *cartoneros* bear witness to the ongoing nature of what Marx, in volume I of *Capital*, calls "primitive accumulation." The story of primitive accumulation names both an end and a new beginning in Marx's analysis, as the destruction of old social forms clears the way for the emergence of capitalist social relations characterized by the separation of capital and labor. Clearing and

accumulation allow for the creation of a class of people who, in Marx's words, have "nothing to sell except their own skins" (*Capital* I, 873).

Aira's novel, meanwhile, seems to propose that we are now approaching the extreme limit of this process. The *cartoneros*, whose existence needs to be understood in the context of new forms of speculative accumulation that first began to flourish under military dictatorship, attest to the tendential full accomplishment of separation. In a world in which one's options are either separation or starvation, their only entry into the labor market is through the refuse produced by the system. If they can only pursue their livelihood in what the system generates as garbage, it is because they are themselves detritus of the system. In Marx's account of primitive accumulation as the violent labor pangs of the capitalist system, separation names the organization of the social around a division or rift—between those who are "condemned to eat [their] bread in the sweat of [their brows]" and those who are not (873). Not only do the *cartoneros*, like many other lumpenproletariat, come close to falling outside this founding distinction, but their growing numbers at the turn of the millennium seem to indicate that the exception is becoming the rule.

A few words about the plot of *La villa* will help give a sense of how the novel positions itself in relation to contemporary social, cultural and political debates in Argentina. One of the central threads is the story of Maxi, the novel's protagonist. Maxi is a young body-builder from a middle class family who is remarkable both for his physique and because, for whatever reason, he simply does not think. When he is not working out, he devotes himself to assisting the *cartoneros* as they make their nocturnal rounds, competing with garbage collectors for anything that could conceivably be sold, reused or eaten. Whereas his neighbors have adopted the habit of looking past the *cartoneros* as if they did not exist, Maxi joins these quasi-invisible residents on their rounds, pushing their overloaded carts and hoisting the more unwieldy items. Maxi is the ethical subject of the novel, performing his role as protector of the powerless with no concern whatsoever for what he himself might stand to benefit. What is noteworthy about Maxi—and as his name itself suggests—is the maxim that governs his actions. In aiding the *cartoneros* he responds to a law that has been evacuated of all particular content, all self-interest and calculation. The true motivation that leads Maxi to join the *cartoneros* every night remains mysterious. It is not just that his

rationale is never revealed to the reader: Maxi himself never stops to reflect on his reasons for getting involved, or is perhaps incapable of such reflection. His actions respond to a call whose origin he never interrogates. In this respect, Maxi is like the rose in Angelus Silesius's poem: he does not ask himself why he does what he does, he simply does it. In fact, within the world of Aira's novel it may be precisely *because* he does not ask questions that Maxi finds himself on the side of the Good, since those who do think inevitably end up interpreting their situations badly, and sometimes with fatal consequences for themselves or others. The promise Maxi appears to embody, that the Good could be brought into the world if we would only renounce the calculating and speculative deliberations that are proper to thinking, is one of the most seductive and also one of the more troubling aspects of Aira's novel.

The other major story line is that of Ignacio Cabezas, a hard-boiled detective working to identify a drug cartel that has set up shop alongside the *cartoneros* in the *villa*. True to his name, Cabezas is the embodiment of reason. Akin to the protagonist of Poe's detective stories, Cabezas employs a foolproof rational method for solving mysteries. Toward the end of the novel—and only after catching a glimpse of the *villa* in its entirety from the aerial footage of a news helicopter—he finally cracks the code through which the cartel had communicated with its clientele, and thereby solves the mystery of how the cartel had been able to operate in the *villa* without detection. But in following through on this act of intelligence, he finds himself caught up in a fatally ironic denouement that recalls Jorge Luis Borges's re-reading of Poe in "La muerte y la brújula." Furthermore, Cabezas's downfall nicely illustrates the textual play with notions of place and displacement in *La villa*: after deciphering the cartel's code and learning where the cartel has been hiding its stash, he makes his way to the secret location only to discover that he has been had. The spatial configuration of the *villa* is described as a vast circle of tightly packed shacks, with informal streets leading from various points on the circumference in toward the interior. The only way for outsiders to distinguish one entry point from another and thereby navigate the labyrinthine structure of the *villa*, is by consulting a specific configuration of light bulbs arranged at each of the entry points, with every entry bearing its own distinctive image (for instance, the road Cabezas is seeking is distinguished by a configuration of light bulbs arranged to resemble a duck). The unity

of place in the *villa* can be altered, however, when the residents—who have been tipped off to the imminent arrival of the Inspector—rotate the electrical image of the duck to another point on the circumference, thereby leading Cabezas down the wrong path. Retrospectively, we see that Cabezas's downfall lay in his unshakable belief in the unity of place. Aira's ironic denouement is consistent with the proposition that mass media technics both calls into question traditional conceptions of place and underscores the conventionality of the sign, which is all too easily uprooted from its moorings in the real and subjected to calculated manipulation.

Aira's treatment of mass media as a regime of truth shares certain insights with Martin Heidegger's account of technology. Particularly helpful in this respect is Heidegger's association of modern technics with *Gestell*, a term that could be translated as "framing," "installation" or "emplacement." In a spirit similar to that of the epigraph found above, Aira's novel portrays the mediatic order as giving shape to a technologically produced world in which what once signified the beyond has been subsumed into the here and now. We encounter a motif for this thought of subsumption in a description of another character, a judge with whom Cabezas is competing to see who can crack the drug ring:

> Una de las declaraciones más famosas de la Jueza, y de las peor entendidas, había sido que su única intención era dejar el mundo, al fin de su breve estada en él, enriquecido con algo que el mundo no hubiera tenido antes. Parecía una tontería, una de esas cosas que se dicen para salir del paso, pero tenía su complicación. Por un lado, poner algo nuevo en el mundo no es tan fácil: sería como traer una piedra de la Luna, salvo que tal y como están las cosas, la Luna ya está en el mundo. Y ella no se refería tanto a una combinatoria nueva de elementos ya presentes, o un cambio de lugar de una cosa, sino a algo de veras nuevo, un elemento nuevo, con el que, si alguien quería, podía hacer combinaciones viejas. Y por otro lado, era un deseo extraño en un magistrado; la justicia funciona como una suma cero, se diría que debe dejar la situación con la misma cantidad de elementos, exactamente, con que la encontró, y que ahí está la esencia de su trabajo. Lo de agregar algo nuevo es más propio del arte. (*La villa* 136–37)

This passage classifies—or disqualifies—the hypothetical presence of the moon rock on earth as a non-event. In a time dominated by techno-scientific and techno-military rationales and their calculative appropriations of (outer) space, the ontological status of the moon

is transformed from a celestial index of the beyond to one point among many in the calculative mapping of the universe. The event of the first lunar landing announces the technological domination of a sphere that had for millennia metonymically represented the unreachable. In Aira's novel, this event provides a radiant image of an epochal transformation of society and its link to nature or the real. At the same time, the subsumption of the beyond into the here and now calls into question the Platonic understanding of truth as residing beyond the world of appearances. This literary questioning of the age-old distinction between truth and appearance is consistent with the idea that media differentiation necessitates a rethinking of the hermeneutic tradition that was the product of print-dominated societies. The collapse of transcendence is analogous to the Jamesonian account of post-modernity as the flattening out of old associations of surface with mere appearance and depth with truth. Aira's novel develops these motifs through a reflection on mass media and its planetary ambitions, portraying a world that has been entirely transformed into a picture or an image.[5]

For Heidegger, the modern philosophical tradition that begins with Descartes is grounded in the presumed equivalency of being with the totality of objects that are capable of appearing before—and consequently of being represented by—a subject. For metaphysics, beings can only appear as beings—and not *nothing*—insofar as they allow themselves to be objectified and measured according to the criteria of logical thinking. The subject, meanwhile, is defined as the ground that gathers appearances back into itself, thereby securing a proper place for everything that is. This subject-driven ordering process causes the world to come into focus as a picture [*bild*], or as the totality of objects that lend themselves to being represented and ordered. Heidegger's view of modernity as governed by calculative reason is equally applicable to modern methods of portraying the past (historiography) as to representations of the present and future (the modern physical and mathematical sciences). The calculative ordering of the world aims to secure a place for the subject, who *enters into the picture*—or establishes its predominance—as the one who has anticipated the world as totality.[6]

At the same time, Heidegger proposes that this subject-centered project of domination can potentially become a victim of its own success. Under the influence of modern techno-scientific

thinking, it is increasingly the system itself—in lieu of the representing human agent—that initiates and administers the ongoing ordering of the real. In Heidegger's words, "[w]here the world becomes picture, the system, and not only in thinking, comes to dominance" (141). In contrast to other modes of revealing and ordering the world, *Gestell* reflects the being of what *is* as "standing reserve," or as the totality of resources available to be counted, stockpiled and consumed. Whereas traditional technology conserves a reciprocal relation with nature, with the mill depending on the vicissitudes of the river's current, modern technology simply asserts itself over nature, with the power plant calling for the extraction of coal from the earth and the damming up of the river. Although modern technological systems may well take root in a metaphysical view of the world based on subject-object relations, the evolutionary drive of modern technology nonetheless threatens to override the old aim of securing a ground for the representing subject. Thus the historical irony identified by Heidegger: in a world dominated by *Gestell*, what awaits us is not the complete domination of nature by the human, but instead the demise of the old dream of the subject as master of its world. This displacement of the subject is no longer a mere hypothetical possibility, and becomes increasingly conceivable as technological evolution outstrips traditional conceits about technology as a means to an end and as a tool employed by a human agent. Amidst the relentless drive of *Gestell*, there would seem to be nothing that could prevent the human itself from sliding fully into the picture, or into the stockpile of "standing reserve." Indeed, one could say that such an event has already been announced, either because all time has now been incorporated into a calculative, administrative rationale that self-evidently equates the human with "human resources," or because the existence of concentration camps has made conceivable the systematic reduction of the human to that figure of disposability that Agamben calls "bare life."

Let us now return to the novel's assertion that "the moon already forms part of the world" and juxtapose this figure with Heidegger's discussion of the world become picture. With this image, Aira is proposing that the distinction between the celestial and sublunary worlds has been suspended in a time when both inner life and social practices are increasingly subject to technological manipulation, programming and calculation. One could certainly read this tropological inclusion of the "outside" within the "inside" as indicating that

the human has, in Maurice Blanchot's words, "become astral [*devenue astre*]" (396), or that humans can now accomplish what was formerly the proper domain of the stars. Aira suggests, however, that the collapsing of the celestial into the terrestrial world does not inaugurate a new order of things in which the world would now administer itself as a stable, self-contained totality, i.e., with humanity fully in control of an always expanding and accelerating technological prowess. On the contrary, this tropological subsumption attests to the feeling that our time suffers from a *loss of sense*. In Aira's words, when "nadie capta el conjunto, sobre todo porque en realidad no hay conjunto" (*La villa*, 55) then "nada tenía sentido, aun dentro del sentido" (63). The inclusion of the beyond in the here and now is experienced as the loss of the world's constitutive outside. That the moon is now part of the world means that the inside or the sublunary, which had always received its bearings and its meaning from its relation to a certain beyond, can no longer sustain itself as a unified, coherent totality.

La villa illustrates a powerful imaginary that helps drive mass media technics. Let us call it the fantasy of *complete inclusion* and *complete coverage*, allowing these terms to resonate with a variety of cultural, economic, epistemological and political contexts in the time of late capitalism. Complete inclusion corresponds, for instance, to the technological administering of free choice and unlimited economic opportunity in the market, while complete coverage names the instantaneous dissemination and complete preservation of knowledge through mass media.[7] Total coverage and inclusion are ideological signifiers serving to dissimulate the originary violence, exclusions and divisions that haunt contemporary forms of social organization. *La villa* explores this ideological function by playing with the mediatic notion of full coverage, even to the point of mimicking the media's idiom, while also suggesting that the notion of total visibility also includes its own forms of exclusion. However, Aira's literary reflection on technics and mass media is not a critique in the same vein as Sarlo's essay. *La villa* does not presuppose the existence of a terrain outside the situation on which it reflects. On the contrary, it not only thematizes the absence of any site untainted by technological mediation and image commodification, it also highlights the presence of these tendencies in its own literary language.

In the introduction *Reading Matters*, an anthology of essays on literature and mass media, Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz describe

how writers such as Thomas Pynchon envision the technological development of new media as leading to a global system of knowledge and control that potentially alleviates the need for human oversight or agency. According to Tabbi and Wutz, this "endlessly looping, total knowledge" (21) is precisely what Pynchon and other writers resist or attempt to transform by imagining other, more affirmative uses for technology. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, Tabbi and Wutz also suggest that a total system of knowledge is logistically impossible, as its development would require "more time—more machine time and memory—more paper, more and cheaper human labor, more everything than the universe provides" (21). In my reading, *La villa* likewise raises doubts about the possibility of total knowledge or "complete coverage," albeit with an important distinction: for Tabbi and Wutz the infinite is a logistical impossibility due to the fact that we live in a finite universe (their notion of total knowledge is what Hegel would call a bad infinity of infinite accumulation), whereas for Aira the impossibility of complete coverage is logical in nature, determined by the fact that the mediatic system generates excesses it cannot subsequently account for and control.

Rather than rely on supposedly stable distinctions between televisual media and mass culture on the one hand, and prior modes of technics and cultural production on the other, Aira's text invites us to consider how mass media technics repeats certain features of the tradition while at the same time intensifying some of its paradoxes. This repetition and intensification can be elaborated by way of Samuel Weber's discussion of mass media technics in *Mass Mediauras*. As the word "television" suggests (the prefix *tele-* means "from afar"), one of the powerful presuppositions driving the expansion of mass media today is the notion that televisual technology extends visibility across distance. Since a body can by definition only be present in one place at a time, distance not only constitutes a limit for the body, it marks the body *as* a limit. Tele-vision embodies the promise of overcoming corporeal limits by making what is seen in one place visible in another place, and thus transmitting the powers of vision and presentation as such. Like all technological apparatuses, television acts as a prosthesis, supplementing a limit that we tend to perceive as a "lack."

We saw previously that Sarlo locates the specificity of mass media technics in the image, whose essence she understands as simulacrum. The problem with the simulacrum is that it effaces what the

Western tradition has always held to be a necessary distinction between original and copy, or appearance and truth. A simulacrum is neither copy nor original, but rather an originary copy that does not refer back to any concept of an origin free from repetition. However, the identification of mass media technics with image and simulacrum risks overlooking a crucial dimension of televisual technics. As McLuhan argued, the specificity of television requires us to address not only the image content but, even more importantly, the medium itself. Weber's analysis has the merit of emphasizing the way in which medium constitutes ideological effects. Televisual technics claims to place here an act of perception that originates in another place. The images that appear on the TV screen are like images derived from another's perception (that of the person holding the camera, for instance), and yet televisual transmission "sees" in a way that no body ever could: by being present in more than one place at a time. Here we can see a connection with Heidegger's meditation on *Gestell*: televisual technics brings the act of perception into view as the power to frame and place something before our eyes.

In Weber's view, televisual technics calls into question—albeit without necessarily overthrowing—some of modern philosophy's foundational assumptions, including notions of body, subject, place and event. Mass media technics causes these philosophemes to become unstable by intensifying the paradoxes and uncertainties that have resided in these philosophemes from their very beginnings. For example, while television appears to transcend the limits that define our embodied relation to the world, it also reintroduces separation in the very presentation of perception. Limits do not dissolve into the televisual ether but instead return—uncannily—as internal to the televisual process itself. What we see when we watch TV is not something taking place here in front of us alone. What is "on" here corresponds with an act of perception going on in some other place, and which is also being transmitted to an untold number of places at the same time. But if television presents the "same" images and the "same" power of vision in multiple places, then what is "here" televisually speaking can never be fully present, since to be present here would exclude being present anywhere else. When it comes to television, the very reference to "the same" underscores the fact that presentation can no longer be the same as itself—assuming it ever was. Tele-visual presentation turns out to be governed a ghostly logic: its transmissions

are neither fully present nor simply absent. The technics of transmission and reception both extends and divides the identity of the perceiving-presenting subject (who ought to be only in one place at a time) as well as the unity of place (since *here* by definition cannot also be *there*). By the same token, the temporality of televisual transmission also disturbs the unity of what we call event. If nothing in televisual transmission allows us to determine definitively whether we are viewing a live broadcast or a recorded version, and if what is "on" here is always going on someplace else, then the ontological status of the event understood as origin or first time has been placed in question. In Weber's words:

> The television screen is the site of such an uncanny confusion and confounding. In the uncanniness of such confusion, what Derrida has called the irreducible 'iterability' of the mark—that repeatability that both allows a trait to constitute its identity while splitting it at the same time—manifests itself in the only way open to it (since it is not of the order of manifestation), namely, as the *undecidable being of the televised images we see.* (121)

In contrast to what was said earlier in discussing Sarlo's position on mass media, Weber indicates that television too cannot prevent the constitutive reproducibility of the image from flashing before our eyes. If the systematic nature of modern technics frames *being* as the totality of objects that can be dominated technologically, the setting-in-place of the televised image would seem to disclose a limit internal to this calculative project: iterability both grants the image its power to appear while at the same time signaling the impossibility of determining a first time. The law of iterability disturbs the picture at the same time that it enables this picture to constitute itself. Televisual presentation thus belongs to the logic of the event—because something happens, because there is presentation—but it cannot be fully of this order, since any such appearance, no matter how original, has already been inscribed with the secondary time of repetition. The tele-visual overcoming of distance cannot avoid reintroducing distance and separation. However, its flickering light does indeed seem to be more adept than other forms of technology at obscuring the ambiguities and paradoxes that accompany these limits.

One of the most fascinating instances of Aira's literary reflection on mass media occurs toward the end of the novel, which culminates in a manhunt organized by the judge after a police informant is assassinated near the *villa*. The fugitive suspect is none other than the

unfortunate Inspector Cabezas, who shot the informant after mistaking him for a member of the drug cartel. The police, unaware of this fatal misunderstanding, speculate that Cabezas is a corrupt cop working for the cartel. As the forces of law and order close in on the *villa*, news helicopters circle overhead providing coverage of the operation. Cabezas, meanwhile, has fled the scene of the crime and sits holed up in a nearby pizzeria, watching the events—how else?—as they unfold on TV. Media coverage announcing the "breaking news" assumes center stage in this literary drama, alternating between live footage of the manhunt and investigative reports delving into the sordid and tragic histories of suspect and victim. Aira's literary treatment of this dramatic media event is driven by a series of mediatic misinterpretations which provide one example of what Contreras terms *desfasaje*: in addition to the previously mentioned misunderstandings surrounding the death of the informant, the media conflates the life of the Inspector with the history of another Ignacio Cabezas, a civilian whose daughter was an accidental victim in a earlier shooting in the *villa*. The coverage thus unfolds as a fable about a grief-stricken father who confuses revenge with justice. In a passage that illustrates another sense of *desfasaje*, we read a description of media coverage as it inadvertently—but also symptomatically—focuses on itself. The manhunt is conducted in the midst of a violent rainstorm, with high winds causing the news helicopters to be tossed back and forth in mid-air. The television footage attests to this turbulence, with images of the manhunt around the *villa* interspersed with occasional shots of other news helicopters with their TV cameras. The inadvertent mediatic "self-coverage" in this scene would seem to be a humorous literalization of Sarlo's claim: there is no event before the camera shows up, and thus the camera becomes indistinguishable from the event itself.

Let us call this a scene of *overexposure*, exploiting both the photo-technical (exposure of a negative) and epistemological (exposure of truth) senses of the term.[8] While the term "overexposure" resonates with the themes of mass media coverage and technical reproduction, it also helps illustrate a way in which Aira's text could be said to be *reading itself*—in the sense of extending the lessons and insights generated at a given point onto earlier moments in the narrative. The linear chronology of narrative development would thus be countered by a second, non-linear movement of doubling back, in which the text folds back

on its earlier presentations in order to highlight new interpretive possibilities made possible by subsequent developments. Textual meaning in Aira is subject to transformation *a posteriori*.

This scene of mediatic coverage and self-coverage supports two readings that are not easily resolved with one another. The first reading, whose skeletal framework has just been presented, would take its point of departure in Sarlo's claim that mass media presides over the displacement of the sign by the simulacrum. The momentary appearance of another camera on the screen inverts the ordinary understanding of mass media as dedicated to the exposure of truths and dissemination of information that exist apart from the media apparatus. Aira's text thereby discloses a truth—what we think of as event is in fact a media event—that we might prefer to ignore. If television promises to place another act of perception before us, the accidental appearance of another camera on the screen constitutes a symptomatic excess, or what Lacan would call a "stain." A stain is what happens when the conditions of possibility for perception or representation, which cannot logically appear within the field of visibility to which they give rise, uncannily intrude into the picture. It is the incursion of the frame on what it frames, or the showing through of the foreclosure that made the picture possible in the first place.

A question imposes itself here parenthetically to the matter of the two readings: does Aira's text allow us to transpose the motif of mediatic "stain" back into earlier moments of the narrative? One could go back in search of other symptomatic "excesses," such as the presence of the *villa miseria* and the *cartoneros* in the heart of a city that fancies itself the "Paris of the South." To be sure, the respective literary treatments of mediatic coverage and social crisis reflect a number of formal similarities: in both cases, part of the hegemonic order (mass media and its claim to provide complete coverage of the social; neoliberalism and its claim to institute a more natural organization of the social) can be seen, by virtue of what the camera or the *villa* makes visible, to have constituted itself through an exclusion or foreclosure, which the system itself subsequently renders invisible. However, there is also an important distinction to be made between these two contexts: with the *cartoneros* and the *villa* we have to do with the exclusion of a more or less constituted identity (a quick look at the demographics of the *villas* will confirm that the social problems of insufficient housing, structural

unemployment and criminality are inseparable from the problems of class and ethnicity in Argentina), whereas with the manhunt scene what has been excluded is not an identity but the technics of mediation. A comparative analysis of literary images and procedures in *La villa* would thus yield different approaches to the question of what kind(s) of exclusion make hegemony possible in the first place. For this reason, the text's reading of itself can only provide a partial, imperfect interpretive model.

The second reading superimposes itself on the first reading, somewhat akin to the overexposure of a photographic negative. While it does not exactly refute the first reading, the second reading suggests that the first must be situated historically, and that it has force only so long as we continue to believe that we can still distinguish mediatic presentation from what is presented. At the end of the novel, it is possible to state that what in another era might have struck the reader's eye as a symptomatic excess or "stain" is, for us today, no longer a stain at all. How so? For traditional understandings of the media and its communicative role, the accidental appearance of the TV camera within a televised picture would indeed have constituted an unwanted surprise. The presence of a camera "looking back" at us as we watch TV would bear witness to the silent, invisible framing mechanisms that make televisual presentation possible, and whose non-appearance is equally necessary—in order for television to maintain its reality effect. At the historical juncture portrayed by Aira's novel, meanwhile, the mediatic recording and transmission of the event has arguably become indistinguishable from the event itself. If that is the case, then we would be approaching a point where the televisual presence of a camera would be no longer constitute a stain: the camera is now, as Heidegger would say, fully in the picture. If the event and its mediatic presentation are no longer rigorously distinguishable, the camera no longer metonymically embodies the unthought and unspoken truth of news presentation. If its incursion on a TV screen is no longer news, this is because the news can no longer pretend to be what it once claimed to be.

In light of this alternative reading, let us return to the question of transposing the lessons gleaned from this later scene onto earlier moments in Aira's novel. Could this alternative reading of the mediatic "stain"—as non-event, or as pure overexposure—be carried over to the socio-economic problems thematized by Aira's novel? Could it be that the visibility of the *cartoneros* in the capital similarly does not constitute

an "excess" within the social topography of post-dictatorship Argentina, i.e., because we have reached a point in history when the *cartoneros*, in distinction from prior manifestations of the subaltern, cannot be said to embody the obscene, unacknowledged exception to the developmentalist thinking that has dominated both the Left's and the Right's views of history in Latin America since the early nineteenth century? The text's reading of itself discloses a rift between one historical temporality—in which there is a stain—and another in which "full coverage" and "complete inclusion" name (while simultaneously covering over) the collapsing of the old distinctions between truth and mere appearance. What space is left for imagining an event that would disrupt or transform the coordinates of this latter regime?

Before we address this question, the notion of overexposure can be further developed in relation to Jean-Luc Nancy's claim that world history can no longer be said to have a predetermined sense—as in a goal, direction, telos, destiny, or meaning. As Nancy puts it, "[w]hat makes up 'world' and 'sense' can no longer be determined as a given, accomplished, 'finished' presence but is intermingled with the coming, the in-finity of a coming into presence, or of an *e-venire*" (126). In proposing a thought of being as event [*evenire*] and arriving [*venire*], Nancy is not just stating that something is still taking place today, that there is still something rather than nothing. The neologisms *e-venire* and *in-finity* (or infinite finitude) name the incommensurability of any place or time with itself. These words work against the reduction of sense to a predicate (the meaning of being, of history or of the world) and offer instead a thought of sense as presentation, or as a becoming that no system, picture or subject could ever fully grasp or complete. Sense is the way in which the world—understood as a network of meaningful relations—happens or takes shape for us today. If history no longer has a sense, if it can no longer be theorized from some transhistorical viewpoint (God, Reason, Progress, Spirit, Man, Revolution), it is because history now demands to be thought *as* sense. There is "something" in the temporality of presentation (historical or mediatic) that remains irreducible to presence or present-ness, something that is not a thing and can no longer be defined as transcendence. This thought of sense is opposed to any claim that we have now arrived at the "end of history."

According to Nancy's perspective, to claim—as I did earlier—that the world or history suffers from a loss of sense would mean that

one remains caught in an unexamined ambiguity: there can be no sense before the mark of loss and without the exposure of meaning to repeatability, which is to say the risk of separation, alteration, misunderstanding, deferral and so on. To speak of the loss of sense only fictionalizes sense as originary presence or fullness. The claim forgets that finitude and errancy are constitutive with respect to sense, and that iterability (or history) does not deprive sense of any positive quality or possession. Like all technological terms, iterability and history are names for a state of originary "default" in which the human is obliged to resort to the supplementary domain of technology in order to become what it is.[9]

Despite what has just been said about the deconstruction of the metaphysical concept of "sense," it could be that the claim that *world history no longer has a sense* has in recent decades acquired another resonance—one that perhaps cannot be submitted to deconstruction—in Latin America's Southern Cone, where the transitions from military dictatorship to free-market democracy are experienced by many as the disappearance of historicity itself. Transition does not just preside over the death of certain meanings or goals once assigned to history, such as the old dreams of social justice or revolution—if that were all there was to it, there would be no conflict with the idea that sense and the possibility of loss are co-originary. For contemporary political praxis, however, the hegemonic triumph of neoliberal "consensus" means that it is no longer possible to look to history for the promise of alternatives to the historical temporality of neoliberalism and its technocratic reason. In this situation, the sociological and political concept of transition coincides with its own impossibility. If we can speak of transition in the Southern Cone today it is because a new order has been consolidated as the administrative time of post-politics and as the foreclosure of any space for thinking and imagining outside technocratic thinking. Transition—if there were one, if the historical situation did not cancel out what the concept purports to describe—would thus inaugurate a time without time in which there is no transit whatsoever. To speak of the "loss of sense" in this context is not just to describe the abandonment of old meanings and aspirations. More profoundly, it means that the possibility of thinking history otherwise (of which deconstruction names one instance among many) has become uncertain.

In alluding to the presumed rupture brought about by the ascendancy of mass media, Aira's text also destabilizes this difference,

exposing what the distinction is obliged to repress and forget: the technological nature of all language, or the fact that technics supplements everything we value as human—all labor and creative activity, all social relations, all individual and collective memory, and all of history. If the instrumentalization of language and the commodification of the image have become defining features of the age of mass media, these outcomes were only possible because technics was inherent to language in the first place.

Let us return now to the question that was posed above. What remains for literature in a time experienced as loss of sense, when the old distinctions between celestial and sublunary, outside and inside, are no longer available to ground thinking, writing and political practice? One possibility to be drawn from Aira's novel is that what remains to be narrated is the event of overexposure or the sense of the loss of sense. This would also be to say: the world in its opening onto what it is not or what it is not yet. In order to see what this might look like, let us turn to the narrative voice of *La villa* as it offers a poetic assessment of the mediatic image in the novel's concluding scenes:

> Era otra vez el tema de la brevedad de la vida, en el mundo de las imágenes. La fantasía que sobrevolaba a los teleespectadores en ese momento era una exacerbación de la brevedad de la vida: un viajero intergaláctico que desembarcara en un mundo extraño, sin protección alguna (¿qué protección podía tener?), y en ese mundo las condiciones ambientales hicieran imposible la vida: estaba condenado, evidentemente, moriría en unas décimas de segundo, podía decirse que ya estaba muerto... Pero mientras tanto estaba vivo, estaba desembarcando en el mundo, en la realidad horrenda del mundo. Y ese 'mientras tanto' era todo. (*La villa* 143)

This passage points to a link between calculation and its spectral others, overexposure and the sense of the loss of sense. The connection flashes in the phrase "in the mean time" [*mientras tanto*], which is literally a leftover or an in-between time, the time of biological overexposure in an environment hostile to life. This empty time, perhaps another manifestation of what Contreras calls *desfasaje*, has been evacuated of the familiar markers that situate time in the metaphysical tradition—as progress, self-realization, evolution, hope and telos. In this time of absolute abandonment there is no longer anything awaiting affirmation, save the sheer facticity of existence. We have already come across

the motif of mass media technics presiding over the collapse of old distinctions between the terrestrial and the celestial. The presence of this unworldly visitor thus hovers in between the domains of fantasy and the real. This traveler can be interpreted as a literary image that initiates reflection on what possibilities remain for literature in a world that has been thoroughly technologically produced. If we take seriously the earlier claim that the celestial has been subsumed into the sublunary, we can no longer invest literature with the hope of giving shape to another world, or bearing witness to a true world that lies beyond the world of mere appearances. This is one of the implications of overexposure: truth can no longer be conceived in terms of the distinction between surface and depth, appearances and reality. If appearances can be said to hide anything, it is the fact that there is nothing to hide. Bearing witness to the overexposure of truth (or truth as overexposure) provides one example of what the writing of the sense of the loss of sense would look like.

If the negative moment of signaling the exhaustion or impossibility of something were all that were left for literature, then the notions of overexposure and the sense of the loss of sense would likely remain well within the metaphysical tradition whose exhaustion they jointly attest to. However, the phrase "mientras tanto" also points to a side of the negative (i.e., beyond redemption, memorialization and so on) that is not reducible to the dialectical motifs of contradiction, negation and reconciliation. It indicates a point where the dialectic begins to stutter, and attempts to name that which negation fails to negate ("existence"). With this phrase, Aira's text affirms the existence of an in-between time unaccounted for by the calculative drives of modern techno-science and neoliberalism. This time of overexposure is the zero-degree of relation; it is an opening to the foreign or to what is still strange in the familiar. In the passage cited above, a horrific death has been foretold as if it had already happened, a death by asphyxiation or irradiation, suffered in utter solitude and absolute oblivion. This imminent death bears the marks of both repetition (it is a foregone conclusion, announced as if it had already happened) and absolute singularity (its story will never be told). Facticity—the facticity of existence but also of dying—is "all there is." Does this mean that the non-negatable remainder of calculation is in fact the secret truth of every determination of *being*?

In Heidegger's vocabulary, the phrase "mientras tanto" corresponds to the existential time of being-toward-death, in which *Dasein*

is marked from the outset by a singular destiny (death) that it can neither know nor share nor avoid. Being-toward-death, however, is also the time of calculation through which *Dasein* seeks to anticipate and account for finitude. "Mientras tanto," then, is the time of technics itself: of mass media and other modern tele-technologies, but similarly of writing and the law of iterability that is inscribed in all languages. If this between-time of technics and repeatability comes last after everything else has been exhausted and abandoned, it also comes first: it is that archaic time in which the human is born, albeit always in a sense "prematurely"—born into the need to turn outside itself, toward that array of prostheses through which it will become what it is. If the human has no essence or being before the turn to technics, then *mientras tanto* names a turn that is forgotten in every determination of technology as instrument of a subject, or as means to a non-technical end.

"Mientras tanto" underscores a subtle but crucial distinction between Aira's text and Sarlo's critique of mass media technics. One can certainly identify moments in the novel that appear to share Sarlo's critical views of the complicity between mass media and neoliberal politics, which together threaten to deafen our ears to the voice of history. *La villa* can be read—and read well—as a denunciation of the technical reconfiguration of post-dictatorship Argentina. But for Aira, technics is neither the problem nor the solution. As prosthesis, supplement and even language, it is that which is both closest and most strange. In short, it is that to which we must open ourselves in order to think, act in the world and relate to one another.

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NOTES

[1] Portions of this paper were presented at the 2006 Latin American Studies Association and American Comparative Literature Association Conferences, and an earlier version was delivered as a lecture at the University of Aberdeen in 2006. I am grateful to Alberto Moreiras, Kate Jenckes, Orlando Bentancor and the anonymous REH reader for their helpful suggestions and encouragement during the writing process.

[2] The origins of neoliberalism in the Southern Cone involve at least two forms of violence. One, to which Sarlo is alluding in this passage, entails the presentation of a political decision (the determination of technocratic knowledge as the truth of the

political) as if it were something other than a decision (consider the frequently used argument that the market is the only "natural" means of social organization). The other involves the fact that the groundwork for the transitions to market economy in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay were laid under military dictatorship in the 1970s and '80s, and that the imposition of market-driven reforms have frequently been accompanied by a rhetoric of fear: either embrace the road to "modernity" as defined by international capital or risk the return of the "demons" that terrorized the country in the past (revolutionary violence and state terrorism).

[3] In *Communication, Culture and Hegemony*, Jesús Martín Barbero describes how radio and film "convey[ed] the challenge and the appeal of populism, which transformed the mass into the people and the people into the nation" (164) that proved far more effective than print media in producing images of national belonging and interpellating subjects across social divisions. In "The Cinematic State," meanwhile, John Kraniauskas discusses how the use of cinematic techniques and affect (melodrama in particular) helped generate a "state effect" in which the image of Eva Perón acted as an ideological mediating force between Juan Perón and the masses of *descamisados*. A concrete example of this mediation can be seen in video recordings of the August 1951 *Cabildo Abierto* in which Eva Perón, who was expected by many to accept the nomination for Vice Presidency, addresses the masses (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-PLyxKSSRk).

[4] Shirin Shenassa's cautionary note regarding critical approaches to mass culture in thinkers like Adorno and Horkheimer, Benjamin and Brecht is potentially relevant for Sarlo's critique as well. The important differences between their approaches notwithstanding, Shenassa finds in each of these thinkers an unwitting tendency to "separate the technology from an idealized user who, given sufficient enlightenment, can return to that technology to make better use of it" (251). For Shenassa, critiques of mass culture too often remain caught up in an all-too metaphysical understanding of technics as the instrument of a subject. While it is true that Sarlo argues that mass media technics represents a threat to the subject understood as origin of political, ethical or aesthetic judgment, she nonetheless appears to share with the thinkers discussed by Shenassa the assumption that the subject represents the best alternative to a world dominated by technics—the subject understood as one who uses technics while remaining in control of it.

[5] I borrow this phrase from Martin Heidegger's 1938 essay "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," whose title has been translated into English as "The Age of the World Picture" (*The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*).

[6] For a discussion of what it means to be "in the picture" see Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture" (in *The Question Concerning Technology*), especially pp.129ff.

[7] The hegemonic triumph of neoliberalism in Latin America is commonly referred to as "the Washington consensus," borrowing a term coined by the IMF's John Williamson

in 1990. Justification for neoliberal reforms frequently appeals to the idea that free markets and unfettered economic opportunity offer the closest possible approximation to freedom; the market, in this ideological vision, becomes synonymous with the end of exclusion and the advent of unlimited choice. "Consensus" would be another name for what I am calling the fantasy of total inclusion and complete coverage.

[8] I owe this term to Brett Levinson's article "Dictatorship and Overexposure," although my use of it differs slightly from Levinson's in that I am emphasizing the disclosures, repetitions and displacements that result from Aira's text reading itself.

[9] On the relation between technics and default, see Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1*.

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